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Nichols, William Henry

New York University commencement address

[New York]

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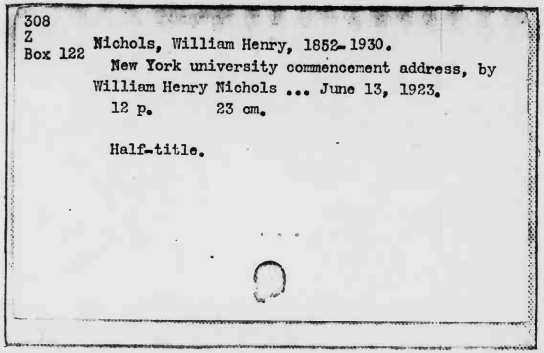

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY
WILLIAM HENRY NICHOLS, Sc.D., LL.D.

June 13, 1923

THE centers of activity of New York University are located at various points from University Heights in the Bronx to the southern end of Manhattan Island in the Wall Street district. Therefore its commencement season furnishes the only occasions for the gathering together of its vast annual output. Here is the Hall of Fame, sacred to the memory of great Americans who have gone before, and facing it are the graduating classes about to pass out from preparation to realization—from the abstract to the concrete. Who knows but that a jury yet unborn may select one of you, because of his worth and accomplishments, as a fitting associate for those great men and women? The thought may well inspire every one of you.

I never attend a college commencement that I do not marvel at the tremendous power for good or evil represented by the young men and young women equipped for the active duties of life with such preparation as a college course can give. The tendency of this influence depends in a large degree on the character of the individual. An address could be based on this as a text, but I choose rather to assume that you are all going out well grounded in character and that your work will be along beneficent and not sinister lines.

It is to be hoped that in selecting your course, you did so after mature deliberation, with a definite notion as to what you have determined to make of your life. There is a well-known rule with duck hunters that, as the flock is settling over the decoys, one bird alone should be marked. The hunter will probably kill that bird, and

he may get several others at the same shot, but if he shoots at the flock he is likely to miss them all. So it is with study. You aim at one thing, and while you may secure several, you will at least be certain of getting your objective if you do your best. The polish resulting from an all-round education is highly desirable, but is somewhat in the nature of a luxury unless it surmounts trained ability in some special line. This has not always been so true in the past. Our forebears enjoyed a simpler civilization. It will be increasingly true in the future, for the complexity of existence expands in geometrical proportion. We may wish ourselves back in the past conditions, but we will never see them. Therefore I think you will find it to your advantage to secure a commanding knowledge of one subject, rather than a little knowledge of many subjects.

Assuming that everyone of you has carefully selected the field in which he is going to put forth his endeavors, and will attain to that success which his industry and abilities entitle him to expect, a wide panorama is exposed in a gathering like this.

Some of you have prepared for engineering in one of its various fields. Let such not be discouraged by the strides which have been taken during the last half century, fearing that little remains to be done. Believe me, we have only scratched the surface of the possibilities of engineering, and you will have nobody to blame but yourselves if you do not produce results which will make those of your predecessors seem comparatively unimportant.

And so with that most alluring of sciences—chemistry. As the secrets of the structure of matter are unfolded one by one, we feel that time will not be long enough to permit the end to be reached. It will require a slice of

eternity if, as I suspect, the limits are nearly boundless, and the variety infinite, at least in so far as our finite minds can grasp.

Some of you will be surgeons or physicians, and the encouragement along those lines is very great. Much has been done by your predecessors but this suggests the vast amount remaining to be done by you and those who follow you. Surely in the amelioration of suffering and the prevention of disease you have opportunities greatly to be envied.

Some of you have prepared for the law in some one of its several fields. How you are going to keep up-to-date with the thousands of new laws ground out every year by our legislatures, state and national, is beyond my comprehension. Some of them are good, some distinctly bad, and many are trivial, yet as law abiding citizens we must respect and obey them all. It is dangerous to assume any other attitude for fear we would be aiding thereby those iconoclasts who are aiming to tear down the whole structure of this, the freest country in the world. This fear need not prevent you, however, from endeavoring in proper ways to improve some laws and totally eliminate many.

And so with all the various schools represented here. Each one has prepared its graduates for a particular branch of service, and every one of these meets a great and unsatisfied need of the country. There is not a subject which you have pursued in your various courses that cannot and will not be greatly developed and extended as time goes on, I trust measurably, by your own efforts.

This need of specialized preparation applies with great if not equal force to those of you who will enter the ministry, engage in literary pursuits, including journalism,

or go into active business or the noble profession of teaching.

An interesting sidelight is thrown on all this by a recent study of the careers of engineering graduates of several institutions. This showed that the proportion of graduates practising their specialty gradually became smaller, until at twenty years after graduation rather less than half remained. The study is still progressing to ascertain whether the remainder were promoted to managing or other higher positions, drifted into other fields, or were gradually absorbed into the general mass of failures.

I presume that nearly everyone of you, while having ideas concerning the welfare of humanity in general, does not underestimate the importance of the personal equation in determining why he has sought a university education. It is very natural that each one of you should first think of himself, and what he expects to make of himself, and how he will benefit his own position in the community. This is perfectly natural and, as far as it goes, it is perfectly right. A man who cannot support himself and his family is hardly worthy of citizenship, unless for reasons of health or other compelling cause he is not able to do himself justice. I will therefore assume that every one of you is going to make a personal success in a greater or a smaller measure in proportion to the gifts with which each one is endowed, and that in reaching for it you are doing what is both right and natural. This being assumed, the next question is, will you fill the whole purpose of your life if you provide properly for yourself and for your family and poor relations. Of course, everyone will at once admit that you will not. If all I have been able to do with my life is to take care of those immediately dependent upon me, I have made a dismal failure. "No man liveth to himself alone" is as true today

as when the words were first uttered. Even if we would we cannot, as in the crowded life of the present day we are constantly coming in contact with others willingly or unwillingly. Our lines cross and recross in every direction. Therefore, if we cannot live for ourselves alone, what course should we pursue in regard to our relations with our fellow men? This is a very complex question, and we could not hope to answer it in a short address. It has got to be answered, however, by everyone of you if you are going to make a success of your lives. How each one of you answers that question will have its effect upon the world and the future, and you cannot shirk your responsibility.

We are accustomed to think of different periods in terms of what seems to be the most outstanding characteristic or accomplishment of each. We speak of the dark ages, the feudal ages, the reformation, the renaissance; or of more recent times, the iron age, the age of steam, or steel, or electricity, or chemistry, or what not. Whatever else may be true of the age in which we are living, one of its outstanding characteristics is the use of propaganda for all sorts of purposes, many of them of such a nature that the word seems to be changing its meaning, and we are beginning to look askance at it. But whether for good or bad, we must recognize the power of this intangible influence of mind over mind—of one mind over millions of minds. It is one of the greatest forces in the world. The communist, or the anarchist, or the Bolshevist, has not got a monopoly on it. It is equally open to the use of the patriot, the philanthropist, or the member of the church of God of whatever branch. These do not seem to be so active as the others, but may this not be a rather superficial judgment? I hope it is. Certainly though, they do not make nearly so much noise. Is it not true that what they advocate sinks in deeper

because it is unselfish? I am going to urge every one of you to join this throng and become a propagandist as a portion of your contribution to the welfare of your fellowmen.

Now a prime attribute of beneficent propaganda is unselfishness. We live in a country covering a vast extent of territory, with many and varying conditions. A trip across the continent will give you a glimmering of some of these, and will indicate the complexity of the problems to be solved. How is Congress, for instance, to legislate so that every section shall be treated as fairly as every other section? How shall it protect and encourage the railroads—those vital arteries connecting the sections, and yet not create a Frankenstein monster, as the thoughtless profess to fear? How shall it treat the subject of taxation, so that every one shall pay his just share, whether he be rich or poor, and industry and agriculture be encouraged, and labor receive a fair proportion of what it earns? Certainly not by forming what we call "blocs." Hamilton foresaw and described this danger when he defined a faction, which is a better word than bloc, thus: "By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united by some common impulse of passion or of interest adverse to the rights of other citizens, or the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."

I have no quarrel with men associating themselves together for the benefit of their section or calling, whatever it may be, as long as they advocate nothing contrary to the public good; but I do feel that the tendency of the present time to exaggerate the importance of one section or calling at the expense of another section or calling is extremely dangerous. We note the tendency to endeavor to remedy every supposed abuse by a special law—to

think in the small rather than in the large—to work for votes rather than for the right. Our country is like our body. You cannot injure one part of it without damaging the rest. I feel assured that there is not one within the sound of my voice who would consciously do anything to injure our country. This land is ninety-nine per cent patriotic, however much noise the other fraction of a per cent may make. Let us not forget this when we are stirred by the strange ways so many have of showing their patriotism, when not brought to their senses by some real danger to the nation.

Now the most important thing is the truth, whatever that may be, or wherever it leads. Outside of the churches, we find very little propaganda urging the establishment of truth, and yet truth is the only thing that will live, and it is the only thing worth while as a foundation for enterprise, or for action, or for living. And here you are, a small army of young men and young women going out into the world with a preparation which should fit you to make the best of yourselves and greatly increase your influence over those who have not had your opportunities, and who may have gone far astray because of prejudice, or ignorance, or unhappy surroundings. I urge you to be seekers after truth. I do not stipulate *what* truth, but the *truth*. Do not be satisfied until you have found it, and having found it, spread it. That is the kind of propaganda which is worthy of any man or woman. You may reply that you do not see the opportunity. I answer that the opportunity begins in your own life and character. Some of the finest orations ever delivered have not been in words, but in the lives of those who are living up to high standards of truth. I am aware that the truth is very difficult to grasp. Many earnest seekers take a wrong track, and go far astray, while others stop short of it and seize hold of something very incomplete. When you start your

propaganda, be sure that you are convinced that your conception of truth is given out, not for your own benefit, but for that of all your fellow men. I have said before that unselfishness is a prime attribute of beneficent propaganda, and I add that you should put nothing forward without first searching your own heart.

There are many truths. I have no intention of pushing any fad of my own, or alluding to any truth about which there may be at present a difference of opinion. I leave it to each of you to pursue the quest. I cannot close, however, without pointing out one truth, proven by the ages, that you may safely make the foundation stone of your own life, and may spread abroad with all the enthusiasm you may possess. It is very familiar to you all. It is worth while to spread it, for it embodies the solution of every problem that now confronts the human race or ever will. It has been recognized by the sages for thousands of years. We find it expressed—

I. In Hinduism—"Do naught to others which, if done to thee, would cause thee pain."

(Mahabharata 5. 1517b in Indian Wisdom, p. 446.)

"Let no man do to others any action which he would not wish done to himself."

(Mahabharata 12. 9248b, in Muir, *Metrical translations from Sanskrit writers*, p. 273.)

II. In Buddhism (about 540 B.C.)—"In five ways should the honorable man minister to his friends and companions, viz., by liberality, courtesy and benevolence, by

doing to them as he would be done by, and by sharing with them his prosperity."

(From Sigolavada Sutta, A sermon of Buddha, translated by R. C. Childers in *Contemporary Review*, 1876, p. 423.)

III. In Zoroastrianism—"And this too is considered by them, viz., that that nature only is good which shall not do to another whatsoever is not good for its own self."

(Dadistana Dinik, 94.5, S.B.E.18, 271.)

IV. In Judaism—"Take heed to thyself, my child: and be discreet in all thy behaviour. And what thou thyself hatest, do to no man."

(Tobit 4, 145.)

V. In Greek philosophy—"The principle of dealings between man and man is very simple: Thou shalt not, if thou canst help, touch that which is mine, or remove the least thing which belongs to me, without my consent: and may I be of sound mind, and do to others as I would that they should do to me."

(Plato, *Laws*, 913 A, Jowett, *Dialogues of Plato*, Vol. 5, p. 299.)

VI. In Chinese philosophy (Lao Tzu 580. 500 B.C.)—"To the good, I would be good, in order to make them good." "With the faithful I would keep faith; with the unfaithful I would also keep faith, in order that they may become faithful." "Even if a man is bad, how can it be right to cast him off."

"Requite injury with kindness."

(From the book Tao Te Ching.)

Confucius (551–479 B.C.)—

I. A disciple asked about the meaning of Love. The Master said, "When abroad behave as if meeting an honored guest; in directing the people act as if officiating at a great ceremonial sacrifice; do not do to others what you would not wish done to yourself; then your public life will arouse no ill-will, nor your private life any resentment."

II. A disciple asked, "Is there any one word which could be adopted as a life-long rule of conduct? The Master replied: "Is not mutuality (sympathy) such a word? Do not do to others what you would not like yourself."

(From Confucian Analects.)

And last and greatest of all, the words of Jesus, "Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you." There is nothing complicated about this. It is wonderful in its simplicity. Great truths are often so. Let it be the foundation of your propaganda and the governing principle of your lives. When every man lives the Golden Rule, there will be no vital problems it will not solve. That day may be far distant, but who can tell? Sometimes from what seems an infinity of error, truth leaps to the front with startling force and takes wide possession. But whether soon or late, let each one of us determine that he will do all that lies within his power to hasten the advent of that happy day.

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